

“Reforming” the College English Curriculum

Howard O. Brogan

IT IS IRONIC that our would-be “reformers” of the college English curriculum believe it to be deficient in “multiculturalism” and “diversity.” I have previously written on the “multiculturalism” of Western Literature, commonly taught in English departments.¹ In this I consider the “diversity” of English language and of English and American literature, which are the main part of the curricula of English departments.

The “diversity” of English began with the three tribes of Low German-speakers that took over what became England when the Romanized Britons were abandoned by the Roman troops. The Angles must have been the predominant tribe since the country became “Angleland,” later England. They appear to have settled chiefly in the north and center of the main island. But there were many Saxons in the south as indicated by such names as Essex, Sussex, Middlesex, and Wessex, and a smaller number of Jutes in the southeast corner. At first the three tribes were divided into ten tiny kingdoms, reduced gradually to three, and they did not become firmly a single kingdom until the Norman Conquest in the eleventh century.

The Normans were also “northmen” conquerors, but of the Normandy to which they gave their name in northern France, and they had become French-speaking in their own Norman French dialect, which they imposed on their new conquest for a sufficiently long time so that Anglo-Saxon lost many of its learned words from disuse by the subjected, mostly peasant, population. Thus, as the Normans became English-speaking they apparently found it easier to adopt Norman-French substitutes for disused Anglo-Saxon words. Thus English became a “medley” language, with a large proportion of Norman French words.

This “medley” language seems to have got the habit of adopting words from the many languages the English met as they spread over much of the world, often with the spellings of other colonial powers. For instance, in colonial America they adopted many American Indian words, often in the Spanish and French spellings, to the great inconvenience of those trying to master English spelling ever since.

The same practice was followed in other British colonies in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa as the English settled there. As they became a mercantile people and eventually an imperial one, they borrowed freely from the numerous languages of India, Indonesia, China, and Japan, so that English is an international and inter-

The late HOWARD O. BROGAN *was Commonwealth Professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, from 1962 until his retirement in 1989. He published over 50 scholarly articles.*

cultural tongue in its very constitution.

As English literature developed, it became as diverse as the language. Anglo-Saxon literature was written before the Norman Conquest, and it was preserved in monastic libraries, to be rediscovered later; a considerable literature was written in Norman French for the Norman conquerors; and even the literature of the still earlier Celtic Britons was preserved in the form of the King Arthur stories popular all over Western Europe in the Middle Ages. Chaucer, the first great author of English, borrowed freely from French and Italian, as did the internationally-recognized William Shakespeare, who borrowed from these as well as from Greek and Latin sources, as later English authors did from many other languages and literatures.

English is international as well as insular in origin, and it continues to be more international all the time. For one of many examples, it has become the world-wide language of air travel, so that there is at least one unfortunate example of a bad accident from an international pilot failing to understand an American English term used by a controller at an American airport.

Most scientists of all lands find it essential to know English because it is the language of most scientific research and publication; but English is equally important in the practical arts. The consequence is that English is the most wide-spread second language in the world, widespread in such huge populations as those of Russia, India, Japan, and China.

English has never been a uniform tongue. Vigorous dialects still are maintained in the various regions of the homeland and in the separate countries of the former colonies as well. While American English is not divided into such distinct regional dialects as in England itself, there are distinctive usages in American regions, New England, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, Central, and Far West, in

addition to certain important urban areas such as Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, and New Orleans, while Afro-American developed its own dialect in the Southeast, and in modern times in urban Afro-American settlements in large urban concentrations. No one American English dominates all other areas of the American continent. While conditions of modern communication keep mutual understanding of most dialects of modern English open, it is easy to see that if some such catastrophe as the fall of Rome should isolate these regions for a prolonged time, English might well develop into as many mutually unintelligible separate languages as Latin did.

The American people find it difficult to believe in the assimilative power of their own culture, including the language and the literature. A striking example is the phenomenal Americanization of the Japanese-Americans of Hawaii. Since these immigrants were too large a proportion of the population to place in concentration camps, as was done of those in California, they had to be trusted. And the FBI reported that there was no important disaffection among them. Those of their young men permitted to serve in our armed forces set an example of valor in the defense of their adopted land against the Japanese of the homeland.

Another example was the service of the American Indians, in spite of their outrageous treatment by other Americans. Such examples ought to persuade us to be much more generous in treatment of our various immigrant populations as well as that of the native Americans.

Certainly our African-Americans, in spite of their long abuse by our other people, have unexpectedly become strong supporters of the Constitution that long subjected them to the status of inhabitants unfit to be considered citizens because in the end that Constitution gave them the power to free themselves suffi-

ciently to become recognized as fully enfranchised American citizens. Women have also found out how to free themselves from long subjection to males by making use of the Constitution.

As we look at the achievement of American authors of the past, we see that such achievement takes time. It is not the first generation that makes its major contribution, but the second and third generations. What our American experience indicates is that an immigrant group, typically coming to our country from the lower social-economic classes of their homelands, often lacking even the ability to speak English, manage by hard work and response to greater opportunity, in a generation or two, to produce major figures in our culture.

Thus we see one immigrant group after another rise to prominence in wealth and culture, and then they produce major achievements in various areas of science, management, and the arts. If the American experience proves anything, it is that very ordinary people, given opportunity in our society, produce achievements comparable to those of the privileged class of the lands from which they were driven by economic deprivation, political oppression, and restricted access to the tools of improvement. But such achievement cannot be expected to be uniform in all such diverse groups.

Some come from nationalities with strong traditions of literary achievement. Some come from entirely different backgrounds. There are sub-groups within large national ones, as most of the world's best violinists come from among Russian Jews. Afro-Americans triumph in athletics perhaps because possessing superior bodies. Jews were driven by Christian medieval bias against them to taking an interest in banking. The Irish, though from a strong literary tradition, first succeeded in politics, probably from struggle against British oppression.

No kind of ability is limited to any one

group, and no doubt opportunity differs from one time to another, so that achievement in so limited a field as the arts cannot be expected to be developed uniformly in all groups. Achievement certainly cannot occur by political fiat. While the Soviet might decree "social realism" to its artists, that only resulted in mediocre official art, while genuine artistic achievement took place "underground."

To try to produce achievement equally in every group proportional to the numbers in the population is not a reasonable expectation.

Therefore setting up proportional quotas is not a reasonable procedure. Such a procedure by any self-appointed clique is arrogant manipulation of other people's lives. It applies a political standard to literary quality that has nothing to do with literary achievement. No self-appointed elite is wise enough to make such decisions, which lie beyond their abilities, just as the attempts by Communist officials to determine what should determine merit in literature and the other arts produced mediocre results for the same reason. No wonder Chinese students at Tiananmen Square were objecting to political judgments of what they should study as stultifying to their education.

But those who believe our English college curriculum is in need of "diversification" must be suspected of not knowing much about the origins and development of English language and literature. Perhaps this is the result of widespread current neglect of history in their graduate training.

Those attempting to alter the literary curriculum, ostensibly to achieve "diversity" and "multiculturalism," have as their real objective requiring all students to read more works by women, Afro-Americans, and Hispanic-Americans as a matter of supposed social fairness and not because of their superior quality. They claim that such works are excluded unjustly in favor of what they like to call dead, white

elitist authors.

The "reformers" who seek this change do not conceal their belief that traditional curricular selections are maintained by a conspiracy of living white elitist professors. Since to them all curricular decisions are political, of course to them these are.

In the past such "reformers" have persuaded administrators to admit more women, Afro-Americans, and Hispanic-Americans without regard to their preparation, often by lowering standards of admission for the latter two groups, and to appoint more women, Afro-American, and Hispanic professors, often by lowering standards of appointment. Previous failure to admit their proportion of the population now justifies giving them such preferential treatment. Professors from these groups are also said to be necessary as "role models" for the students from them.

By this way of thinking, as an Irish-American student, I should have been taught Irish-American works only by an Irish-American professor, Emily Dickinson only by a nineteenth-century woman, Shakespeare only by a Renaissance Englishman, and Homer only by an ancient Greek. However, I learned to admire teachers and authors who were women or men from ethnic backgrounds different from mine, and I naïvely assumed that the best authors to a considerable extent transcended time, place, and gender, and were therefore available to students of all backgrounds.

An English professor colleague whose opinions I usually admire does doubt that Shakespeare deserves the high reputation that often leads to his being selected as the outstanding representative of English literary quality, but I disagree because of what seems to me to be convincing empirical evidence. Shakespeare did not always have such a reputation. I heard the elder G. E. Bentley tell of the research by which he found many of

Shakespeare's own times expressed a theoretical preference for Ben Jonson's more classical plays over Shakespeare's unclassical ones, though they quoted Shakespeare's far more frequently than Jonson's. But as the seventeenth century rolled on, Shakespeare's works still held the stage better than Jonson's, and his writings continue to do so over all other English authors in the next century. By the nineteenth century respect for Shakespeare's work was being displayed in Germany and even in France, in spite of French Voltaire's calling Shakespeare a "barbarian" for putting violent action on the stage contrary to classical example. In the twentieth century, as World War II approached its end, I believe I remember Shakespeare was being acted in Berlin and Moscow as well as in London and New York, a tribute that can hardly stem from Anglo-American prejudice.

Probably other great authors have gained their reputations similarly by what used to be called "the winnowing of time" or the "judgment of posterity."

As for judging works by theoretical standards of any particular era, that has produced such absurdities as Thomas Rymer's censure of Shakespeare for having Othello become jealous merely of his wife's purloined handkerchief and not her garter, and Tolstoy's judgment that Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery fiction ought to give her literary merit over Shakespeare.

It may seem heretical of me, but I suggest that the present judgments of "deconstructionists" and "post-deconstructionists," with their constant references to Marxist/Freudian standards, may in time seem as absurd as they contemptuously consider the New Critics to have been, even though the New Critics were as dominant for two generations as the "deconstructionists" and "post-deconstructionists" are now.

There are fads and fashions in styles of literary criticism just as in styles of

clothes, and some of them are nearly as brief.

I did not suppose as a teacher that I had an absolute right to select what works I should teach by my own personal preferences or by some other standard of criticism than literary merit against the demonstrated empirical preference of successive generations of intelligent readers. If some works seemed to me preferable to others generally taught, I sought reasons for their long sustained appeal.

Before we start selecting works merely to achieve "diversity" we should ask ourselves whether "diversity" is a proper objective. Traditionally works were thought to have been valued for their broad human appeal and their wide impact on Western culture.

Thus Mark Twain, who has had such a broad impact on Western culture, extending over many nations for several generations, is valued for his giving a remarkably broad sense of humanity to his fiction, transcending differences of nationality, race, and gender, and so he is a particularly effective representative of American culture at its best. Should he be replaced in the curriculum by a woman, a "black," or a Hispanic-American as a matter of "fairness" when few would believe that such a substitute would have a similar impact on readers?

Which provides the better role model for a woman, an Afro-American, or a Hispanic-American, Twain or some author selected, not for the quality of the work, but to be "fair" to that author to meet a gender, racial, or national-origin quota? The superior qualities demonstrated by Twain are not gender, or race, or nationality limited. He was brought up in a patriarchal, slave-holding society. Yet he was able to project imaginatively his characterization of a black man fleeing slavery far better than most white or even "black" authors.

So Shakespeare, though brought up in a society despising Jews and writing on

an occasion of particularly strong prejudices against them in his *Merchant of Venice*, was still able to so sympathetically characterize Jewish Shylock that good actors are able to make Shylock almost the hero of the play.

Though Shakespeare was a male, he characterized women better, from that keeper of a bawdy house Mistress Quickly to Queen Catherine, than most women authors have so far been able to do.

Brought up in a lower middle-class home in a class-conscious society, he so triumphantly portrayed characters from semi-literate Bottom to kings and queens that numerous critics have tried to prove that a man of his class and limited education could not so convincingly have projected himself into royal society and that some aristocrat must really have written his plays.

The best authors ought not to be selected according to what would be considered their fair proportion of the population but by merit, the way our best athletes or musicians are. Merit in any field of endeavor is not distributed to various groups in the population proportionally. Afro-Americans dominate sports far more than their proportion would warrant, and also jazz music. And so with Jews in entertainment, journalism, banking, and medicine.

Nobody suggests that "whites" be allowed more slots in professional basketball. Why should it be insisted that "blacks" be guaranteed a certain quota of major authors? Or women? Or Hispanic-Americans? Pretending that women, Afro-American, and Hispanic-American authors have already achieved major status as authors according to their proportion of the population would be as futile now as it would have been for earlier Americans to insist the "Hartford Wits" were serious rivals of Shakespeare.

The best models for all students in any field of endeavor are those who are best in the field, not those who are best from

their own particular gender, ethnic, or racial group. We have followed the right procedure in making special provision for students with special interests in authors from these groups and not to require them, especially when they are taught, as they commonly are, by women violently anti-male, Afro-Americans violently anti-Caucasian, or Hispanic-Americans violently anti-Anglo. Such "teachers" are really propagandists and not teachers. They spread prejudice, not sympathetic appreciation. They do not "diversify" but narrow the curriculum.

Fortunately they are a self-limiting minority. There are now many women teachers who are adding to the appreciation of overlooked women writers and adding a new perspective to the interpretation of male authors as well. There are Afro-Americans who correct any false misconceptions of literature by "black" authors without denying merit to major "white" authors. And some, not yet many, Hispanic-American authors make their students aware of the scope and power of Hispanic literature, but not yet of Hispanic-American authors, for these do not yet achieve major status in English.

We should broaden our perspective, not narrow it. We should increase our respect for other cultures, but not by denigrating our own. All cultures have limitations, including ours. But the tri-

umphs, not the failures, have made our own Western culture, with its English-speaking contingent, achieve its present worldwide prestige. That is also an important lesson for our students to learn. The curriculum should embody especially the best authors and not be limited to only the best women, the best Afro-American, or the best Hispanic-American writers. The best available provide the best "role models." Only these can be justified for required reading by all students.

The proper way to add students or works from women or minority groups is to encourage them to improve qualitatively in order to deserve inclusion, not to add them by what amounts to political fiat. That is arrogant presumption to insist that some authors and works deserve to be declared meritorious as a matter of fairness. It was the former Russian Soviet way for determining merit, rightly believed now to have produced mediocrity in all the arts. At least Plato admitted that letting a self-selected elite decide what kind of literature and art should be tolerated in his ideal state would produce mediocrity.

Let us also admit that no such self-selected group is wise enough to make such decisions. There is more wisdom in a whole body of people than in any such group, especially in an arrogant minority of self-proclaimed intellectuals.

1. See "The Multicultural Teaching of Western Literature," *Modern Age: A Quarterly Review*, Vol.

35, No. 4 (Summer 1993), 311-322.